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Essay by Richard Samuelson

JEFFERSON, ADAMS, AND THE AMERICAN FUTURE



THOMAS JEFFERSON AND JOHN ADAMS were an unlikely pair. Few hosts would seat them next to each other at a dinner party, particularly if there was going to be wine. Who would think that the tall, lanky, courteous, and reserved Virginian and the short, pudgy, irascible, and pugnacious son of Massachusetts would be such great friends? Adams was an earthy character, with a biting, sarcastic wit. He was fond of the saying, "What forbids me to speak the truth by joking?" Having grown up on a farm, he had the habit of comparing manure piles wherever he traveled around the world.

Jefferson was more refined. Born to the frontier gentry of Virginia, he spent much of his youth in the great houses of that state—particularly the plantation of his mother's family, the Randolphs. Shy in crowds—he gave his inaugural address in a voice so low that only the people very close by could hear—he could be incandescently charming in small groups. The author Margaret Bayard Smith found "something in his manner, his countenance and voice that at once unlocked my heart." Jefferson studied farming academically, kept rigorous records of his plantation, and made careful experiments in agronomy. Although he could tell an amusing tale, he did not think the human condition fundamentally humorous.

Despite their differences, the two men were great and abiding friends. Although, they were bitter rivals and enemies during the political fights of the 1790s and early 1800s, those years were the exception. Forged in

the crucible of Revolution and in diplomatic service in the 1780s, their friendship was steadied by a political partnership that made it possible for them to reconcile in 1812 and spend their last years corresponding with exceptional thoughtfulness about the American experiment.

Men of 1776

JEFFERSON AND ADAMS WERE BOTH MEN OF 1776, both founders. They agreed that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that governments are instituted to secure those rights. We hardly need to quote the Declaration to establish Jefferson's credentials on this score, but we should remember that Adams was, by Jefferson's own account, "our Colossus on the floor" defending the Declaration to Congress. Perhaps the best place to see Adams's commitment to the principles of '76 is the constitution of Massachusetts, which he drafted in 1779. That constitution, the first to be written and adopted by a special convention, and ratified by the people, put the principles of '76 into action. The Preamble explained:

The end of the institution, maintenance and administration of government is to secure the existence of the body politic; to protect it, and to furnish the individuals who compose it with the power of enjoying, in safety and tranquility, their natural rights and the blessings of life; and whenever these great objects are

not obtained, the people have a right to alter the government, and to take measures necessary for their safety, prosperity, and happiness.

The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good.

For both Adams and Jefferson independence was an opportunity to help the American people create a new, better republic than any that had existed before, and to secure glory for doing so. Just as Moses had forged the Jewish people, and Romulus the Roman people, so too would they form an American people. And just as Lycurgus and Solon had formed the constitutions of Sparta and Athens, so too did they wish to forge the American constitution. In the conclusion to "Thoughts on Government," Adams's influential pamphlet of 1776, he charged his fellow legislators:

You and I, my dear friend, have been sent into life, at a time when the greatest law-givers of antiquity would have wished to have lived. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government more than of air, soil, or climate, for themselves or their children. When! Before the present epocha, had three millions of people full power and a fair



opportunity to form and establish the wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive?

Jefferson saw it the same way. Immediately after Congress approved the Declaration, he returned to Virginia and began revising the entire legal code for the state, and drafting a new state constitution. (Virginia accepted many of his legal revisions, but not his proposed constitution.)

By the time of their deaths, Adams and Jefferson had seen America grow from colonies into a nation. It was the signal accomplishment of their lives, and they took understandable pride in it. In the spring of 1826 Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, was traveling to Boston and wished to meet one of the last surviving "Argonauts" of America's heroic age. Jefferson penned a letter of introduction, which served to close his side of the correspondence on a fitting note: "It was the lot of our early years," he reflected, "to witness nothing but the dull monotony of colonial subservience, and of our riper ones to breast the labors and perils of working out of it. Theirs [his grandson's generation] are the Halcyon calms succeeding the storm which our Argosy has so stoutly weathered."

After Enlightenment

IN 1815, ADAMS WROTE JEFFERSON, "WE MAY say that the eighteenth century, notwithstanding all its errors and vices has been, of all that are past, the most honourable to human nature. Knowledge and virtues were increased and diffused, arts, sciences useful to men, ameliorating their condition, were improved, more than in any former equal period." Jefferson responded in kind. "I agree with you[r letter] in all its eulogies on the 18th. century. It certainly witnessed the sciences and arts, manners and morals, advanced to a higher degree than the world had ever before seen." Jefferson saw it as part of a larger story of progress. One can, he said, "observe that the arts and sciences...advanced gradually thro all the 16th. 17th. 18th. centuries, softening and correcting the manners and morals of man."

This exchange reminds us that Jefferson and Adams were men of the Enlightenment, believers in better living through reason. As such, they hoped that modern science would make the world easier for humanity to live in.

Writing at the tail end of the long Napoleonic wars, the friends were worried fathers. Adams continued, "but what are We to say now? Is the Nineteenth Century to be a Con-

trast to the Eighteenth? Is it to extinguish all the Lights of its Predecessor?" In reply, Jefferson agreed, wondering, "how then has it happened that these nations, France especially, and England, so great, so dignified, so distinguished by science and the arts, plunged at once into all the depths of human enormity, threw off suddenly and openly all the restraints of morality, all sensation to character, and unblushingly avowed and acted on the principle that power was right?"

Here we begin to see the nub of the disagreement between the two patriots. Adams simply asked whether Western civilization would be inferior in the 19th century, compared to the 18th. Jefferson expressed profound surprise that France and England, the nations most "distinguished by arts and science" in the 18th century, had made a turn back toward barbarism. Did improvement in

At the root of the disagreement was a classic philosophical or even theological question: what is the cause of evil in the world?

science necessarily bring a more general progress? Did modern science invariably soften and correct "the manners and morals of man"?

Jefferson raised the question of progress in the first letter he wrote Adams after their reconciliation in 1812. If "science produces no better fruits than tyranny, murder, rapine and desecration of national morality," Jefferson stated, "I would rather wish our country to be ignorant, honest and estimable as our neighboring savages are." By mentioning "science" in that fashion, unadorned with an adjective, Jefferson was pointing to modern natural science in general. Prior to the 17th century or so, "science" referred to all fields of study. In the medieval university, theology was the "queen of the sciences." Aristotle spoke of "political science"—the reasoned study of politics. In the early 17th century, Francis Bacon had refined and popularized the modern scientific method of experimentation, observation, and calculation. So powerful was that method that by the early 19th century, it was growing increasingly rare to speak of "science" in the old, comprehensive sense. From Jefferson's perspective, much of what Aristotle and Aquinas called science hardly qualified. By his day modern natural science was already

starting to put more and more power in the hands of men. If modern science did not correspond with a more peaceful world, Jefferson was not sure it was worth it.

John's great-grandson Henry Adams expressed a similar fear during the Civil War:

Man has mounted science, and is now run away with. I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide, by blowing up the world.

Jefferson never went quite so far, ultimately retaining his faith that history was a story of progress, from lower to higher levels of civilization. Thanks to science and free trade, the world was becoming safer and more peaceful. Before the modern age, war was common. Absent modern science, there would be scarcity, and scarcity led to war. Given the choice of starving or taking someone else's food most men would choose theft. Similarly, given a choice between taking water rights from the neighboring land, by force, or having no water to drink, most nations would choose war. Thanks to modern science, however, Europe has not suffered from a debilitating famine since the early 18th century.

Furthering that progress was, Jefferson thought, part of the American project. America would show the world that peace was a better policy than war. While observing the Napoleonic wars in Europe, he wrote Adams that "I hope we shall prove how much happier for man the Quaker policy is, and that the life of the feeder is better than that of the fighter; and it is some consolation that the desolation by these maniacs of one part of the earth is the means of improving it in other parts. Let the latter be our office." Similarly, during his presidency he wrote, "Peace is our passion, and the wrongs might drive us from it. We prefer trying *ever* other just principles, right and safety, before we would recur to war."

Adams agreed with Jefferson that America had something important to teach Europe: "I should like to see an election for a President in the British empire or in France or in Spain or in Prussia or Russia by way of experiment. We go on pretty well, for we use no other artillery than goose quills, and our ink is not so deleterious as language and grape[shot]," he wrote Jefferson.

Even so, he thought Jefferson's fondest hopes for science were mistaken. The Napo-

leonic wars were no anomaly. "Science, literature, mechanic arts and those fine arts... which you love so well and taste so exquisitely," Adams wrote Jefferson, "have been subservient to priests and kings nobles and commons monarchies and republics. For they have all used them when they could, but as the rich had them oftener than the poor, in their power, the latter have always gone to the wall." Governments, even when armed with modern science, could not regulate the actions of men nearly so effectively as scientists regulated the actions of matter. That being the case, war would continue to be necessary in the future. That was part of the human condition.

Wars are the natural and unavoidable effects of the constitution of human nature and the fabric of the globe it is destined to inhabit and rule. I believe further that wars, at times are as necessary for the preservation and perfection, the prosperity, liberty, happiness, virtue and independence of nations as gales of wind to the salubrity of the atmosphere, or the agitations of the ocean to prevent its stagnation and putrefaction. As I believe this to be the constitution of God Almighty and the constant order of his Providence, I must esteem all the speculations of divines and philosophers about universal and perpetual peace as shortsighted, frivolous romances.

War was, and would remain, part of man's terrestrial history, Adams thought. For him, there were no unalloyed goods in the world. Modern science was yet another example of that reality. Not hoping that the world could be changed fundamentally, he took such improvements in technology as he could get, even if they came with risks and dangers. Besides, it was too late to un-invent them.

Reading History

ADAMS AND JEFFERSON BOTH EMPLOYED the modern scientific method, but not in the same way. Jefferson selected facts from history to describe change over time, from a lower to a higher plane of existence. Adams, by contrast, was inclined to study the behavior of human beings in the same way modern scientists study the behavior of, say, ants. Rather than doing controlled experiments, however, his data set was historical. Drawing upon that data he discovered patterns. Wherever one found humans, one found certain things—governments, religion, families, private property, etc. From that data,

one discovered general rules. These described human nature.

Readers of Adams's treatise on republican government, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, are often put off by the cumbersome, repetitive detail. He goes through the history of republic after republic to draw general conclusions. One major conclusion was that all societies present one principal personage, beneath him a group of the second order, and, finally, the mass of men. Summarizing his conclusions about the ancient republics, Adams wrote, "the orders we defend were common to all." He repeated this conclusion years later in a letter to Jefferson: "Pick up, the first 100 men you meet, and make a republic. Every man will have an equal vote. But when deliberations and discussions are opened it will be found that 25, by their talents, virtues being equal, will be able to carry 50 votes." Such sorting was natural and, therefore, the general rule in human society. Adams reasoned similarly about religion: "I have endeavored to obtain as much information as I could of all the religions which have ever existed in the world. Mankind are by nature religious creatures. I have found no nation without a religion." Adams complained that "Rousseau says the first man who fenced a cabbage yard ought to have been put to death. Diderot says the first man who suggested the idea of a god ought to have been treated as an enemy of the human race." Adams thought both men were fanatics.


He allowed that great changes happened, but he also held that a wise reader of history found significant patterns. Hence he had every expectation that the future would be substantially similar to the past. When reading ancient historians, Adams wrote Jefferson, "I seem to be only reading the history of my own times and my own life." In the early 1800s, he penned a "History of the French Revolution, by a Society of Latin Writers," in which he pulled passages from the classical Roman authors and spliced them together to describe the narrative of the French Revolution. The implication? The same as Robert Conquest's suggestion that the new edition of his *The Great Terror* (1968) bear the title, "I told you so you f---ing fools!"

To be sure, Adams realized that there was considerable dispute about what, exactly, were the constants in human life. Ultimately, however, Horace was right: "you can drive nature out with a pitchfork, but she always returns." To believe that we, unlike all previous generations, can change the world fundamentally is the height of hubris.

Jefferson drew different conclusions from history. For starters, he argued that Adams's

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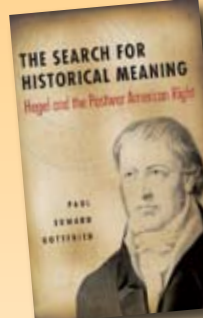


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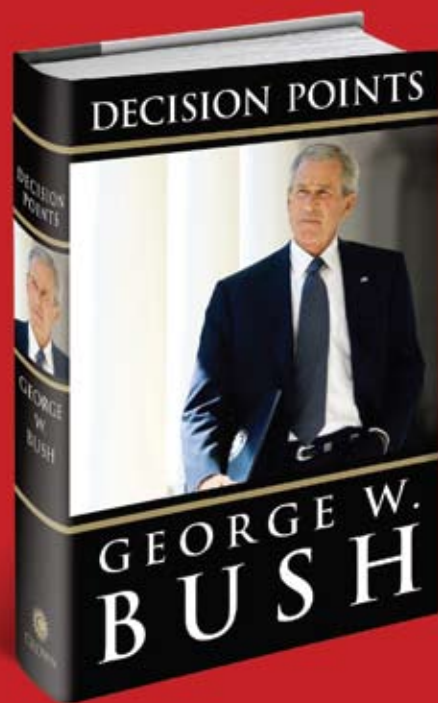
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sample was too small and too narrow. In one letter he wrote: “we should further consider that, before the establishment of the American states, nothing was known to history but the man of the old world.” The American future, Jefferson held, would reveal a different side of human nature than Adams had observed in the European past.

More generally, Jefferson did not see history as a reliable record of the human animal in action. Like Henry Ford, Jefferson thought that history is bunk. “History,” he wrote in 1807, “in general, only informs us what bad government is.” (He went on to say that an “American politician” ought to know something of British history, “as we have employed some of the best materials of the British constitution” in our own. Jefferson allowed that a particular history could be useful to explain a particular political system.) Unlike his friend Adams, however, he did not think that history was a major field of study for statesmen. Jefferson, in short, believed that change over time was the story of history. Natural aristocracy is a case in point. Jefferson wrote Adams that, “I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents.” To Jefferson, however, the qualities that elevated some men above others varied with historical circumstances. “Formerly bodily powers gave place among the aristocracy. But since the invention of gunpowder has armed the weak as well as the strong with missile death, bodily strength, like beauty, good humor, politeness and other accomplishments, has become but an auxiliary ground of distinction.” In the past, brute strength gave a man status, for it made him more valuable to society than others. By Jefferson’s lights, such a man was a *natural* aristocrat. Thanks to science, that was no longer the case.

Over time, he thought, the character of the natural aristocracy improved. According to Jefferson, in addition to the natural aristocracy, “there is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class.” Progress would entail doing a better job of putting the former, rather than the latter in office.

Adams thought his friend misunderstood nature and history. “Tho’ we have agreed in one point, in words, it is not yet certain that we are perfectly agreed in sense,” he wrote Jefferson. “Fashion has introduced an indeterminate use of the word ‘talents.’ Education, wealth, strength, beauty, stature, birth, marriage, graceful attitudes and motions, gait, air, complexion, physiognomy, are talents, as well

as genius and science and learning.” For Adams, a “talent” was a quality that gave someone power or influence in society. “Any one of these talents, that in fact commands or influences true votes in society, gives to the man who possesses it, the character of an aristocrat, in my sense of the word.” Certain features that bore no necessary relation to true wisdom and virtue always helped some men get ahead. Throughout history, name recognition and physical beauty gave one man or woman an edge over another. That was natural, according to his definition.

Adams hardly understood how Jefferson could hold so many historical phenomena to have been contrary to nature. “Your distinction between natural and artificial aristocracy does not appear to me well founded. Birth and wealth are conferred on some men as imperiously by nature, as genius, strength, or beauty.... When aristocracies, are established by human laws and honour, wealth, and power are made hereditary by municipal laws and political institutions, then I acknowledge artificial aristocracy to commence.”

Like modern behavioral economists, Adams thought that human beings, scientists no less than common men, were irrational in predictable ways. (And Adams was careful to apply the lesson to himself. “I may be deceived as any of them, when I say, that power must never be trusted without a check,” he wrote). To Adams, therefore, aristocracy was only artificial when the laws protected particular families. Why had such laws so often gotten onto the books? Because they built upon a natural human phenomenon.

Jefferson saw it differently. He suggested that “the terms Whig and Tory belong to natural, as well as to civil history.” Adams quoted those words back to Jefferson, and added, “precisely.” Adams was being ironic, for Jefferson went on to suggest that revolution in Europe would change things: “in this tremendous tempest, the distinctions between whig and tory will disappear like chaff on a troubled ocean.” What Adams thought was natural and permanent among men, Jefferson thought would change over time.

Back to the Future

ULTIMATELY, WE MIGHT SAY THAT Thomas Jefferson and John Adams saw the future differently because they read the past differently. At the root of the disagreement was a classic philosophical or even theological question: what is the cause of evil in the world? The great author of the *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), Ernst



Cassirer, noted that theodicy (justifying the ways of God to man) was a political problem for the men of the Enlightenment. For people who believed in better living through reason the challenge was political: if human beings were capable of living in peace and harmony in the future, and if wisdom and virtue had could rule in the future, why had they so often failed to do so in the past? What, if not human nature, had made the past such a bloody mess?

Jefferson blamed the ills of the past on primitive science, combined with bad men, bad laws, and bad governments. His views of religious history make that point quite clearly. In the famous Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, Jefferson argued that priests had “established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.” Coercion had sustained bad religions, and wars had resulted when one false religion fought another for territory and converts. If establishment was the cause of religious excess and conflict, Jefferson reasoned, disestablishment was the solution. After the state of Connecticut got rid of its establishment in the early 1820s, Jefferson celebrated: “The genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.” Absent religious establishment, “genuine doctrine” would carry the field, and religious wars would cease. Science would also help. Jefferson claimed that “it is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one.” Take away religious establishments, add modern science, and religious wars would end.

Jefferson thought similarly about politics. To put the right men in power, he thought, all one had to do was “to leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the aristoi from the pseudo-aristoi, of the wheat from the chaff.” (Jefferson, of course, also believed in educating the people to perform that project. That presumed that such education was possible on a mass scale.) It was, in short, not inevitable that name recognition, wealth, or beauty would turn people’s heads. There needn’t be political dynasties in America. That was only true in primitive societies, managed by tyrants or oligarchs for their own benefit.

In America, Jefferson held, such irrelevancies would no longer be politically significant.

Why had the French Revolution gone wrong? Ultimately, Jefferson blamed Napoleon for “the demolition of the fairest hopes of mankind for the recovery of their rights, and amelioration of their condition, and all the numberless train of his other enormities; the man, I say, who could consider all these as no crimes must have been a moral monster.” Tyranny, blood and rapine besotted the pages of history not, as Solomon believed, because “there’s nothing new under the sun,” and, therefore, “a time to love and a time to hate. / A time for war and a time for peace.” Solomon didn’t have modern science to help him. Shortly after he became president, Jefferson wrote Joseph Priestley, “We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun. For this whole chapter in the history of man is new.”

By contrast, Adams thought that evil, or what seemed to be such to mankind, was sewn into the universe by the Creator. “The fundamental principle of all philosophy and Christianity,” Adams told Jefferson, “is ‘REJOICE ALWAYS IN ALL THINGS.’ Be thankful at all times for all good and for all that we call evil.” Adams presumed that God made the world a certain way for good reason. From there, he read history as the record of human action. Responding to Jefferson’s argument with Solomon, Adams noted that much had changed, “I can yet say there is nothing new under the sun, in my sense.”

The myth of progress had blinded man to certain human truths, as did the desire to be original. The belief that the world could be changed fundamentally struck Adams as little more than the latest religion. “Whenever an order of men can persuade the people by flattery or terror that they have salvation at their disposal, there can be no end to fraud, violence, or usurpation.” In the modern age, it was “reason” that claimed to have salvation from the evils of this world at its fingertips.

To make that case, however, modern men had to presume that science could eliminate war, as it could eliminate many diseases. Similarly, they had to presume that their point of view was simply true, and not based upon certain arguable assumptions. Moreover, Adams realized that the hope for Progress justi-

fied crimes similar to those justified by other hopes for salvation.

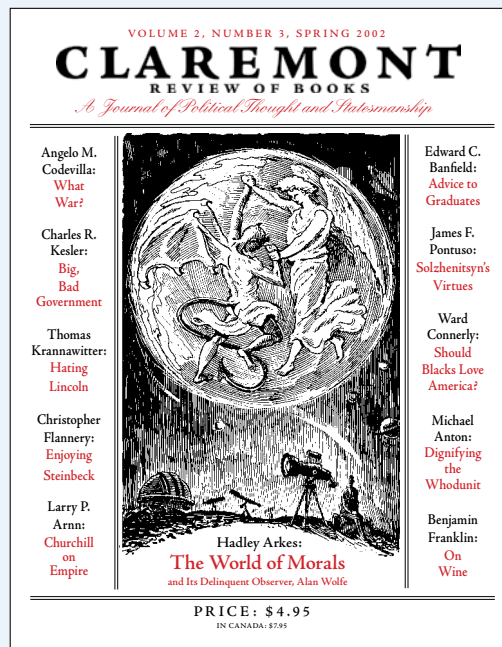
Despite reports of the Terror in France, Jefferson continued to support the Revolution, for “the liberty of the whole earth was depending on the whole issue of the contest.... [R]ather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam & Eve left in every country, & left free, it would be better than it is now.” By then, Adams was already on record against the French Revolution. In 1790, he warned his countrymen of its excessive hopes: “Cold will still freeze, and fire will never cease to burn; disease and vice will continue to disorder, and death to terrify mankind.”

That some denied and even denounced Adams for writing such things was no surprise. History had seen their type before. “Power always sincerely, conscientiously, de très bon foi [in very good faith], believes itself right. Power always thinks it has a great soul, and vast views, beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service, when it is violating all his laws.”

Note Adams’s language. “Power always” believes *x* and thinks *y*. Such delusions were, as a rule, inevitable among men of science no less than common men. The only thing that set the modern delusion apart was that it called itself “reason.”

Adams’s last letter to Jefferson was no less fitting than Jefferson’s last letter to him. “Public affairs go on pretty much as usual,” he reflected, “perpetual chicanery and rather more personal abuse than there used to be.” That meant that each successive generation would be equally free to succeed or fail. Jefferson hoped for a more general improvement. “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past,” he wrote Adams. Progress was and remains difficult, but, thanks to Jefferson, it is enshrined as a goal of the American regime, even if, thanks to Adams, it is a chastened, and one hopes chastening, goal.

Richard Samuelson is assistant professor of history at California State University, San Bernardino. This essay is adapted from the 2010 Jefferson Lecture at the University of Tennessee Space Institute.



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